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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the rationale for the project approach to educational programming from the cognitive-developmental perspective. It is argued that in many ways, the project approach reflects the cognitive-developmental view; that it is a convergence of Piaget's constructivism and Dewey's progressivism. Like any approach, the project approach is a way of teaching, learning, and thinking about children, learning, and knowledge. The project approach views the child as active, individual, and whole. Children are unique in terms of experience, perceptions, understandings, and interests. This uniqueness should be the school's starting point in fostering continuous growth and development. To understand the physical environment and know the functions of things, children should have hands-on experience in interacting with and manipulating objects. Learning that is focused on both the physical and social environment involves knowledge, skills, disposition, and feelings. It is concluded that what is required in preschool and kindergarten is an intellectually oriented approach in which children interact in small groups as they work together on a variety of projects which help them make sense of their experience. (RH)

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Why the Project Approach

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the rational behind the project approach from the cognitive-developmental perspective. The project approach views the child as a whole, an individual and active agent involving in dynamic interaction with the physical and social environment.

Why the Project Approach

An educational "worldview" reflects value assumptions about the aims of education and psychological assumptions about the nature of the child and of learning and of development.

Different conceptions of childhood govern the kinds of educational experiences that are advocated for children. Each educational program or approach is derived, explicitly or implicitly, from theoretical conceptions about children's development and learning and each has its goals or ideals as to the qualities and capacities the program or approach is designed to foster in the participating children (Shapiro & Biber, 1972). In the history of education, according to Kohlberg and Mayer (1972), there are mainly three streams of educational "worldview": romanticism, behaviorism, and progressivism. Romanticism is derived from maturationist theory of development, which stresses the biological metaphors of "health' and "growth" in equating optimal mental development with mental health. Accordingly, early education should allow the child to work through aspects of emotional development, and it should also allow the expression of intellectual questioning and curiosity. Behaviorism is derived from behavioristic theory of development which views the development of the mind through the metaphor of the machine, and implies the idea that the child's behavior can be shaped by immediate repetition and elaboration of the correct response, and by association with feedback or reward. In contrast, progressivism is derived from cognitive-developmental theory of development which stresses a dialectical metaphor, viewing knowledge evolves from an internal psychological core through an interaction or dialogue with the physical and social environment rather than by direct biological maturation or direct learning of external given from the

environment.

But then, what is the conception of development and learning behind the project approach? What is the conception of childhood behind the approach? In a world, what is the *rational* for the project approach? Like any other approaches (programs), the project approach is also a way of thinking about children, about learning, and about knowledge, and a way of teaching and learning. Historically the idea of the project approach is not brand new. It originated from John Dewey's progressive educational philosophy at the beginning of this century and developed over the decades through American progressive education movement and English infant school open education (Katz, 1987). More recently, the understanding of Piaget's work in the 60's and 70's and current research on child development and children's learning further support the idea of project approach. In many ways, the project approach reflects the cognitive-developmental view, a convergence of Piaget's constructivism and Dewey's progressivism.

From the cognitive-developmental view, children are seen as unique and active in all aspects of their individual development. No one of these aspects can be separated. The three characterization of a child - as active, individual, and whole - are focal to the project approach. As each child is born an individual, he develops as an individual in individual ways and all experiences are personal and individual in meaning. The task of schooling should build from the foundation upon a full recognition that the child, each child, is unique and individual. Each child is unique and has an individual pattern and timing of growth, as well as individual personality, learning style, and family background (Bredekamp, 1987). The individual's uniqueness of experience, his perceptions and understandings, and his interests should be the school's starting point, from which to foster continuos growth and development. These are the links to new experiences

and extensions for further learning.

A child grows, develops, and responds as a total being, not as separate parts. One of the most important premises of human development is that all domains of development- physical, social, emotional, and cognitive - are integrated, intertwined within the whole. Development in one dimension influences and is influenced by development in other dimensions. How children feel about themselves will affect their ability to learn. The abilities children develop will affect their self-image and sense of worth (Bredekamp, 1987). Like development, children's learning is integrated during the early years. Young children do not need to distinguish learning by subject area. For example, they extent their knowledge of reading and writing when they work on social studies projects; they learn mathematical concepts through music and physical education. Through the early years the curriculum should be integrated. Integration of curriculum can be accomplished in several ways. The curriculum may be facilitated by providing learning areas in which children plan and select their activities. Integrated curriculum may be planned around themes that are selected by the children or by the teacher based on the children's interests (Project Approach).

In the process of learning the child is an active agent. He seeks opportunities and experiences to find about his world. The child makes sense of the world through the assimilative and accommodative process. Piaget regards these functions as our most fundamental processes of learning and growth. Assimilation refers to the process of absorbing and organizing experience from the activities that produce them. Accommodation refers to the modification of the assimilation process because many situations or experiences resist the known pattern. The child tries them on, causing, in turn, some changes in the existing pattern. This important part of learning or intellectual growth is done by the child

himself, through his actions as the agent for his own learning. Learning results from the interaction of children's own thinking and their experiences in the external world. As Katz (1987) points out, Learning for young children is maximized when they are engaged in interaction rather than in passive activities. The child, then, must have the support conditions that allow him to be an active learner and use his own questions and directions as next steps for learning.

Learning involves not only the child's interaction with the external physical environment but also his active interaction with people around him: parents, teachers, and peers. Children in the stage of concrete operations typically attain social skills that have important implication for schooling. Among these is the ability to take another person's point of view, which vastly expands the child's communication skills. Engaging in conversation strengthens children's abilities to communicate, express themselves, and reason (Katz & Chard,1989). Children should be provided opportunities to work in small groups, on projects that provide rich content for conversation and that teachers facilitate discussion among children by making comments and soliciting children's opinions and ideas. Children of primary-grade are becoming intensely interested in peers. Establishing productive, positive social and working relationships with other children provides the foundation for developing a sense of social competence. Teachers should recognize the importance of developing positive peer group relationships and provide opportunities and support for cooperative small group projects that not only develop cognitive ability but also promote peer interaction.

Research indicates there are different kinds of learning and they require different learning experiences and different teaching methods. Piaget identified physical knowledge, logico-mathematical knowledge, and social knowledge (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987). The primary source for physical

knowledge is objects, the external physical environment. To know the objects and understand their functions the child should have direct hands-on experience interacting and manipulating the objects. The primary source for logico-mathematical knowledge is the knower. The child should actively internally interact with his experience to understand relationships between or among objects. The primary source for social-knowledge is people. The child should interact with others to gain social understanding and social competence. None of the kinds of knowledge can be poured in by adults from outside.

Also, Katz and Chard (1989) categorizes learning into knowledge, skills, disposition, and feelings. Knowledge may be acquired by having somebody explain or tell us something, and strengthened through studying and repetition. Skills may be learned from instruction and can get better with practice and drill. Dispositions, however, are different. They are not learned through instruction or drill or lectures or workbooks. There are many dispositions that we want children to acquire and strengthen - to be curious, creative, cooperative, friendly, helpful, hardworking. These dispositions can be learned primarily from being around people and interacting with people, and to have opportunities to behave that way.

Based on past research on child development and children's learning, Katz (1987) suggests two principles of learning in young children: (1) the younger the children are, the greater the variety of teaching methods should be; (2) the younger the children are, the more informal the environment should be. Therefore, what is required in preschool and kindergarten is an intellectually-oriented approach in which children interact in small groups as they work together on a variety of projects which help them make sense of their own experience.

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